

“Peace Signs”

Acts 2:22-32, I Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31
Easter II, March 30, 2008, Hope Church, Lynn Japinga

Last Sunday’s Easter service was a grand celebration ... the choir, the brass, the bells, the lilies. We sang “Thine Be the Glory” and we took the alleluias out of hiding and we declared over and over that Jesus Christ is risen indeed. It was great worship.

But it bore little resemblance to the first Easter when there were no bells, no choirs, no lilies, no alleluias. Instead there was a lot of confusion and uncertainty. The way the Gospel of John tells the story, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the morning and found the stone removed. She told two of the disciples and they came to the tomb and found the cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus’ body. Then they went home. They did not understand what they had seen. Mary stayed at the tomb, and had the encounter with Jesus that we read about last week. She went to the disciples and told them that she had seen Jesus! But the disciples were not convinced.

That night the disciples gathered to commiserate. They locked the doors because they were afraid they might be arrested and crucified as Jesus had been. They thought they might be blamed for the disappearance of Jesus’ body. They were afraid. But they were also despondent. They had let Jesus down. Most of them had run away from the cross. Peter had denied Jesus. But Jesus had let them down as well. He was supposed to be the Messiah! He was supposed to redeem Israel and turn the world right side up again. He would bring justice and peace and the reign of God. Instead, he had turned out to be no different than anyone else. How could they have been so gullible and naïve?

Mary said she had seen Jesus, but the disciples did not take her seriously. Maybe they assumed that in the midst of her grief she had dreamed or imagined that she saw

Jesus. Peter and the other disciple had seen the empty tomb and the grave clothes, but they did not understand what it meant. Maybe somebody had stolen his body. Dead is dead, after all.

Except it wasn't. There was Jesus, standing among them! A grave could not keep him in, and a locked door could not keep him out. Death did not have the last word, and Jesus was alive. That's great news ... but if you were one of the disciples, wouldn't you wonder? Was this a ghost? Were you seeing things? Had grief made you imagine that you saw Jesus? Was there such a thing as a group hallucination?

Jesus understood that. He knew that they were shocked and frightened and mystified. "Peace be with you," he said. He showed them his scars and it was clear that this really was the same Jesus who had been crucified. And then they were thrilled! What a reversal! What an upset! What a victory for God's team!

And then Jesus said again, "Peace be with you." Why does he do that? Wasn't once enough? I wonder if the disciples had moved quickly from despair to a kind of giddy euphoria. I wonder if they were starting to make plans for the reign of God. How they would pay back all the people who shouted "Crucify him." What it would be like now that Jesus was in charge. So Jesus said again, "Peace be with you." Take a breath. Let's think this through. It's not going to be as easy or quick as you think. And in fact I have a job for you! As God has sent me, so I am sending you. You disciples are all going to do my work.

Well ... that was kind of intimidating. Terrifying, even. Look how dangerous the work of Jesus had been! Look how deadly the results! The giddy euphoria ended in a hurry.

But Jesus assured them that they would not go alone. He breathed on them and gave them the Spirit of God. It's the same image we read about three weeks ago, when the Spirit of God breathed life into the dry bones. It's the same image that is in Genesis, when God breathed life into the first human being. When God or Jesus breathes into us, we have life. We have hope. We have a future.

The end of the day looked a lot brighter than the beginning. But Thomas had missed the memo about that meeting. The disciples told him that Jesus had appeared, but Thomas wasn't going to believe it unless it saw it for himself. Poor Thomas takes a lot of grief for that. But really, he didn't ask for anything more than the rest of the disciples had experienced. Mary had told them Jesus was alive, but they didn't believe until they saw him. Thomas went even a step further ... he needed to actually touch Jesus, he said.

So a week later, on the second Sunday of Easter, the disciples were gathered again, with Thomas this time, and again Jesus appeared. Again he offered peace. And then he offered himself to Thomas. Touch my hands. Put your hand in my side.

Did Thomas do it? The text does not say. There is a lot of religious art that shows Thomas actually touching Jesus, but the text says only he called Jesus his lord and his God! Jesus doesn't criticize Thomas or shame him. But Jesus does say that in the future, people will not be able to see Jesus as the disciples had done, and they would be blessed if they believed without seeing.

It's two thousand years later, and that's where we are. We don't see Jesus and we have to believe without seeing.

But we can see ourselves more easily in other parts of the story. We know what it means to be afraid. We keep the doors locked. We try to keep our children safe. We are

afraid of terrorists. The whole country seems to operate out of fear and is trying to keep its doors locked against various threats.

So to us also, Jesus says, “peace be with you.” What does that mean for us? If we have enough locks on the door, will we find peace? If we eliminate all negative thoughts and worry from our lives, will we have peace? If we refuse to read the newspaper or listen to the news, will that bring peace? If we simply flash the peace sign, like the hippies in the 1960s, will that bring peace?

First, peace means that we have a task. Like the disciples, we are called to do the work of Jesus in the world. God’s kingdom has still not fully arrived in this world, and God asks us to be compassionate, to seek justice, to care for the poor, to preach the gospel. It is not easy, and Jesus breathes on us and gives us the Holy Spirit. So however we are called to do God’s work in the world, we can be certain that God is giving us the power and the authority to do it.

Second, Jesus gives peace about the reality that our faith journeys take very different forms. Jesus invites us to faith, and gives us what we need. The stories we have read throughout Lent illustrate that ... Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Mary and Martha ... each had their own way of coming to a relationship with Jesus. He did not expect them all to be alike. And so with us. Some of us have believed since birth. Some came to faith later in life in a dramatic way. Some struggle with faith their whole life. Some ask a lot of questions. Some find it easy to believe. And Jesus says, be at peace about that. He does not judge or criticize. He is constantly offering himself and inviting us to a relationship. Our individual faith stories are important, but ultimately we are part of something bigger. We are part of a community of faith that

stretches back for thousands of years. When we don't have enough faith of our own, we can borrow the faith of others.

Finally, Jesus gives peace about the scars and the brokenness and the struggles that persist for all of us. His wounds were still evident somehow, even in a resurrected body. Our wounds stay with us too. They can be healed, and transformed, but they do not always go away. And perhaps that is good. Because they remind us of the wounds and the scars of the world. People are hurting, and they need to be touched with grace and care.

The world is not a very peaceful place. The world thinks peace-makers are foolish and unrealistic. War and violence seem to be more effective ways to resolve conflict. And in the midst of this, Jesus says over and over, peace be with you. It's not easy. There is a lot of hard work involved. Peace is both a gift and a task. Jesus offers peace, and he invites us to help bring it about. Justice and shalom, not just for ourselves, but for the whole world.